

First Mennonite Church

Nappanee, Indiana



75th Anniversary

1875 - 1950



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75th ANNIVERSARY EDITION

of the

HISTORY

of

THE FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH

NAPPANEE, INDIANA

NOVEMBER 26, 1950

BEGINNINGS

As early as 1853 the Mennonite settlers who had entered land in this community, gathered in the homes for worship. They were served by visiting ministers from Ohio and Pennsylvania. In the sixties a young man from the group, John Ringenberg, was ordained to the ministry, and served until his untimely death in 1871.

As school houses were built they were found more convenient than homes as meeting places. The Culp School was so utilized and when the first school house in Nappanee was built, the group contributed \$250.00 toward the building with the understanding that they might use it as a church meeting place. This same building is still standing on the lot on North Main Street where it was first built.

In 1875 the group of worshipers formally organized a church with thirteen charter members: Jonathan Smucker and wife, Henry Stahly, Sr., and wife, Christ Stahly and wife, Levi Hershberger and wife, John Johnson and wife, Ulery Miller and wife, and Magdalene Bleile. Jonathan Smucker was minister until he moved from the community in 1895; and he served as bishop from 1877 to 1903.

For many years the church was known as the Amish Mennonite Church. After the Indiana-Michigan Conferences of the Amish Mennonites and Mennonites merged, it became known as the West Market Street Mennonite Church.

A number of settlers coming directly from Germany became members of this group because of their Mennonite heritage in Europe. Some, who were members of Lutheran and other churches, were attracted to the group because of their use of the German language.

No written records, even of the formal organization, remain. Perhaps they didn't consider the work they were doing of enough importance to record it; or, likely, some of the written records have been lost through the years. The earliest record dates only to the year 1888; it is quite complete, but later records are missing. If inaccuracies have crept into this account they must be attributed to the fallibility of the memories of those who were a part of the original group, as much of the information now available was recorded from facts passed on to this generation by word of mouth.

The first church building was erected on the site of the present church in 1878. It was a small building, 34 ft. by 40 ft., which is incorporated in the present building. It was very simple in arrangement and furnishings, heated by two box stoves and lighted by oil lamps. Early current expense accounts include such items as 10c for stove blacking, 20c for a broom, 20c for a wash basin and towel, and 35c for a load of kindling. E. Newcomer was paid "25c for cleaning and varnishing clock." As late as 1894 janitors were paid \$13.00 per year for "cleaning and building fires", plus \$2.00 twice yearly for "scrubbing". Labor was often contributed when repairs on the building were needed, or when the hitching racks needed "fixing". When major repairs were made a record was kept of the days of labor contributed. Expenses were estimated and assessments levied on all members. The amounts of the assessments varied, evidently in consideration of the ability of the members to pay. There are several records of assessments having been paid by Peter Stahly for families who were unable to pay. In 1902 the complete current expenses totaled \$50.24.

Ministers serving the early church, in addition to Jonathan Smucker, were Jacob Bleile, Eli Bontrager, and J. Henry McGowan, the latter serving for more than twenty-five years. They served without pay, making their living by farming or some other day labor. There are a few records of money being given them for

attendance at conferences; in 1897 Preacher Smucker was voted \$14.00 to attend a conference in Pennsylvania. When visiting ministers filled the pulpit they were given a dollar or, if they came from a considerable distance, a dollar and a half. Until 1911 the ministers were assisted in pastoral work by "Visiting Brethren". Henry Culp, Peter Stahly, Dan Mast, and Henry Ringenberg each served many years in this capacity.

The church was zealous in its care of the needy. A "poor fund" was maintained and from this people of need in the community, as well as those from among the membership, were helped to some of the necessities of life. An interesting item in May 1895 lists as items purchased at Hartman's for a needy family: "coffee, sugar, beef, buttons, calico, and crackers — \$1.12".

As was true of many Mennonite churches, this church did not awaken to a responsibility for missions until the late nineties. The earliest record of a "Collection for Missions" was at Christmas in 1897, when \$5.71 was received. This, plus a dollar from the Sunday school treasury, was "sent by Emanuel Stahly to the Chicago Home Mission". In the same year a collection was taken for "building church houses purposes", which money was evidently sent through some channel to help erect churches in new communities. In 1900 such a contribution was sent to a new church being built in Idaho. Some mission-minded members sent individual contributions of money directly to India when missionary work was opened there. On November 30, 1899 an offering of \$15.00 was given for India; again in July 1900 an offering "taken at Bible meeting for India sufferers" amounted to \$8.60.

For many years the church program consisted mainly of Sunday school and the morning worship service. For a number of years there was a worship service only every two weeks, as services were held on alternate Sundays at the church on North Main Street. The first record of regular Sunday evening services was in 1898 when a "Young Peoples' Bible Meeting" was organized. There seems to have been an arrangement with the church on North Main Street for services were held at the two churches on alternate Sunday evenings. A complete record of the meetings at this church shows that speakers were frequently inter-changed. This record is spiced by the very frank personal comments of the secretary, John H. Walters. Some meetings were described as being "very fine and spiritual", others were labeled as "dull". This record tells of the first public meeting that was led by a woman; the leader for the evening meeting on November 9, 1902 was Mrs. Elizabeth Byler, who "proved herself very good". A woman as leader must have met with general favor for only a few weeks later Nellie McGowan was listed as the leader.

EXPANSION

In 1910 the church seemed to feel the need of an enlarging program. The church was remodeled; the old building was turned, an addition was added to the front, and a basement was put under the entire building. The lawn was leveled and seeded to grass, and the first circle of trees was planted by the trustees, Peter Stahly, Sam Mast, and Levi Schrock.

In 1911 Levi W. Yoder was ordained to the ministry and Simon Schmucker was ordained as deacon to assist with the pastoral work. Shortly thereafter a complete program of Sunday school, morning worship, and young peoples' meetings was held each Sunday.

In the early days there was much fellowship among the members. Seldom did a family spend Sunday afternoon at home alone; they either entertained another church family or were guests in some home. Group pictures existing testify to the fact that the young people of the church enjoyed frequent fellowship in each others homes.

In about 1913 the young people organized a Literary Society. Meeting monthly with varied programs, it helped to meet the need of the young people for training in expression, and, also, provided social activities. This organization continued for some ten years when its place was, to some extent, taken by an organized Christian Endeavor.

There was a growing interest in missionary work which manifested itself in the inauguration of monthly offerings for missions. These were received during the Sunday school and handled through a separate treasury. Records show that amounts ranging from \$494.00 to \$1,300.00 were contributed each year. This system of missionary giving continued until 1927.

There was an awakening interest in higher education. In 1918 more than \$1,500.00 was subscribed by members to help erase the debt of Goshen College.

REORGANIZATION

The early twenties found this church, along with a number of churches in the Indiana-Michigan conference district, with a majority of its members in disagreement with conference authorities in their emphasis on certain clothing regulations for women. This resulted in a complete reorganization in the fall of 1923. A group of fifty-six members withdrew from the conference and were joined by thirty-five from the church on North Main Street to make an independent congregation of ninety-one. In the spring of 1924 twenty-five more members were added. About fifty members desiring to remain in the conference, affiliated with the North Main Street Church, and some fifteen members united with churches other than Mennonite.

The reorganized church called Ezra S. Mullett, the former minister at North Main Street, to be the pastor. He served the church for twenty years.

In 1925 some improvements were made in the building; a new front entrance was built and plumbing was installed. These improvements were completed just prior to the All-Mennonite Conference which the church entertained in that year. Food for the meals was donated and the offerings given by guests were used to purchase dishes and silverware for church use. A good gravel drive was put in and more trees were planted. In May 1926 the Women's Missionary Circle voted the sum of \$12.00 to buy shrubbery to plant the corners of the building. In 1932, after the sheds had been removed, many members co-operated in planting a background of shrubbery and trees. Families contributed trees as memorials, the shrubbery was donated, as was the labor of planting.

For forty years prior to his death in 1946, the building and lawn were cared for by Daniel J. Miller.

The parsonage at 558 West Centennial street was bought in 1944 at a cost of \$6,000.00.

In the summer of 1926 the congregation voted to apply for affiliation with the General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America. Soon after that it became known as the First Mennonite Church of Nappanee.

E. S. Mullett resigned as pastor in 1943 to take a church in Wayland, Iowa. The following year the pulpit was filled by Irvin R. Detweiler of Goshen. In July 1944 Jacob J. Enz of Newton, Kansas, who had just graduated from Biblical Seminary in New York and been ordained to the ministry, assumed the pastorate. After four years of service he resigned to take a position of college teaching and as editor of THE MENNONITE. In September 1948 Rollin W. Moser of Dalton, Ohio, who had been serving as assistant pastor in the Mennonite church in Upland, California, was called to the pastorate. He was ordained to the ministry on June 11, 1950 and continues as the present pastor.

For most of its history the church operated without a constitution; procedure was determined by majority consent, or followed year after year from force of habit. In 1945 the church board delegated to a committee headed by the pastor the task of formulating a constitution. After being presented to the church for consideration it was adopted on January 1, 1946.

ORGANIZATIONS THE CHURCH SCHOOL

In 1880 (?) a Sunday school was organized to meet during the summer months. The first superintendent was a Mr. Bowman, a member of the Methodist church who worked in this church because the German language was being used. It was a decided step forward when, about ten years later, the school was kept open the year around as an "evergreen Sunday School".

Later superintendents in the order in which they served were: Jacob Bleile, J. H. McGowan, Henry Ringenberg, Eli Bontrager, David Lehman, A. M. Garber, J. H. Walters, E. S. Lape, Homer North, O. J. Yoder, Dan Metzler, Elva Schrock, Elden Schrock, and Stahly Weldy. Of these, four were later ordained to the ministry, three of them serving in this church.

The first primary department was organized in 1910 with Nora Lape as the superintendent. Many years of service have been given by many people as teachers; Henry Ringenberg and J. S. Slabaugh have each given more than forty years in this service, and the latter is today an active teacher in the church school.

Through the years the Sunday school has been the chief educational agency of the church. It has been responsible for securing much equipment, such as library, picture collection, projector, slides, maps, mimeograph, typewriter, and hymn books, as well as lesson materials. In 1945 the educational program was expanded to include a Vacation Bible School for the children of the community; this was held each year until 1949 when the church co-operated with the other churches in organizing a Community Vacation Bible School. Young people have been encouraged to attend retreats, and the church school has always borne a share of the expenses.

Many projects of service have been sponsored by the church school. Since 1924 the children have been encouraged to contribute to missionary projects. These have included regular gifts to the family of a Filipino pastor, World Friendship projects, and M. C. C. projects. Missionary projects recently carried to completion have been: a heifer for relief, \$125.00; books for India, \$136.00; books for China, \$90.00; Bibles for Japan, \$23.00; and a piano for the children's home in Colombia, South America, \$322.00.

The church school also raises the money to pay our share of the cost of week day Bible teaching to the children of our schools.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORK

Sunday evening meetings from 1898 on were labeled "Young Peoples' Meetings" although they were attended by people of all ages. There was an effort to give young people an opportunity to learn to express themselves; they were frequently used in the programs, giving "declamations" or reading "essays" which they or someone older had written. The programs were apparently planned by adults.

In 1925 a separate young peoples' Christian Endeavor was organized. Its committees took the responsibility for the Sunday evening programs, but all ages still attended.

During most of the last fifty years the young people have been active in one way or another; sometimes they have worked through organized Sunday school classes, sometimes they have maintained a separate organization.

Since the organization of conference retreats young people of the church have been in attendance in goodly numbers. The first retreat held on the Bluffton College campus in 1925 was attended by Florence Miller, Iola Yoder, Dan Metzler, and Elden Schrock. The young people who have not been in attendance at one or more retreats are few in number. Adult members of the church have served on the retreat committee, and as teachers and counsellors.

The people of the church, both young and older, are taking an active interest in the development of the new camp-site on Shavehead Lake near Union, Michigan. Our church has contributed the money and labor for one of the cabins in addition to making a substantial contribution toward the purchase price of the camp-site.

The young people support the activities and projects sponsored by the Young Peoples' Union of the Middle District and of the General Conference. Two young people have each spent a summer in Voluntary Service; Carol Pletcher in Germany in 1949 and Ronald Kirkwood in a mental hospital unit in New Jersey in 1950.

WOMEN'S WORK

On December 26, 1907 in spite of some opposition, the women met at the home of Mrs. J. H. Walters and organized a Sewing Circle. The first officers were Ida Miller, president and Nora Lape, secretary-treasurer. There was a buying committee: Katie Walters and Mary Ann Schrock, and a cutting committee: Sarah Stahly, Anna Weber, and Carrie Ringenberg. The first offering was \$1.27, which was spent as follows: thread—5c, buttons—5c, 10 yards of calico—60c, and outing flannel—57c.

The Sewing Circle continues to the present and has rendered much service to mission stations, both at home and abroad. Following both world wars, shipments of tons of food and clothing have been made possible by the efforts of the women through this organization.

On October 26, 1924, at the home of Mrs. N. A. Lehman, the Women's Missionary Circle was organized with Elva Schrock as president, Mrs. J. S. Slabaugh as vice-president, and Leona Stahly as secretary-treasurer. Its primary purpose was the study of missions, but it has gradually been expanded to include missionary service, both in the giving of money and in the doing of various kinds of work for missions and relief.

These two organizations are the channels through which the women serve the local church and community in various areas. They are also the organizations sponsoring service, in money and gifts in kind, to our college and seminary.

Many women have given themselves in sacrificial service, not only in faithful attendance at all meetings, but also by working countless hours in preparing work, finishing same, and in planning the general program of women's work. Anna Garber, Mary Ann Schrock, Sarah Mullett Yoder, Lila Slabaugh, and Emma Bleile Schrock were among those who gave much time to this labor of love for those in need.

LAYMEN'S WORK

On April 26, 1926 the men of the church met at the home of N. A. Lehman and organized the Witmarsum Men's Bible Class. This group took an active part in the growth and development of the church during the ensuing decade. Its first officers were: O. J. Yoder, president, L. V. Mullett, vice-president, and Dan Metzler, secretary-treasurer.

The class sponsored such projects as getting the piano for the church ,taking the responsibility for raising the \$300.00 necessary for its purchase. They took an active interest in the

newly-formed choir; they assumed the financial responsibility of securing B. Frank Hartzler as the director, installed the choir light, and raised the money for the choir chairs. They secured new hymn books for the church, bought the out-door bulletin board, and erected the bulletin board in the hall. They initiated the envelope system of giving, and joined the women in planting shrubbery as the background for the church. An active part was taken in the fight to retain prohibition, and the class went on record as opposing the extension of military service. Regarding both issues a number of protests were sent to legislators.

In 1937 the Class ceased to function. The men of the church now unite with the men of near-by churches of the Central Conference to form the Five-Church Brotherhood. They endeavor to make sure that our church takes its full share in the relief and rehabilitation projects sponsored by the Brotherhood.

CHOIRS

During the past twenty-five years the church choir has made a significant contribution. It has assumed responsibility for the music at the regular services of worship, and has given many programs on special occasions such as Christmas and during Lent.

The choir was responsible for securing the organ in December 1949, raising the purchase price of \$3,000.00. The Senior Choir has also sponsored the Junior Choir and assisted with its direction.

The choir under the leadership of its directors, has done much to raise the musical standards of our services. Those who have served as directors are: M. E. Mullett, B. Frank Hartzler, Esther McDowell, Fred Pletcher, Joan Veston Enz, and June Moser. Esther McDowell and Marye E. Mullett have organized and directed Girls' choirs. Mrs. Enz organized the Junior Choir and Mrs. Moser and Carol Pletcher have also directed it.

THE CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY

The First Mennonite Church was one of the first churches in Nappanee, although for many years it stood outside the limits of corporation. In the early days it did not take an active interest in the community, exhibiting much of the Mennonite spirit of isolation and exclusiveness. However, there is a record of a contribution given by the Literary Society to the public library in 1921.

After the reorganization in 1923 there began an era of full co-operation with the other churches of Nappanee in community enterprises. Union meetings of all kinds have been supported, and there have always been members enrolled in the union Leadership Training schools. The church has supported the program of week day Bible teaching to the children of our schools, and an active part has been taken in the promotion of a Community Vacation Bible School. The church has been used as a center for the school each year and has furnished its quota of leaders and teachers.

THE CHURCH TODAY

The present church has a membership of 170 ,with a broad responsibility roll of about 290.

REPORT OF CHURCH CONTRIBUTIONS IN 1949

Local Church Support	\$7,226.27
District Conference Support (Camp-site included)	604.60
Foreign Missions	449.45
Relief (including value of goods sent)	3,186.58
Peace	101.16
Other Conference Causes (Seminary included)	1,146.10
Bluffton College	803.68
Other Contributions	195.52
	\$13,817.36

ACTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Church School, including five organized classes.

Church Choir, which in addition to providing music for services sponsors the Junior Choir.

Women's Sewing Circle and Women's Missionary Circle, which are in the process of effecting a union into one organization of Christian service under a new constitution.

The men co-operate with the Five-Church Brotherhood.

A Youth Group for Intermediates is in the process of being organized.

FORWARD

The present members of the church look to the future with hope. There are a large number of children and many fine young people offering a challenge and giving promise of future workers.

The affiliation with the General Conference has been a most happy one. The expanding program of the conference gives enlarging opportunities for service in many areas. Conference activities such as conference sessions, retreats, workshops, and voluntary service offer opportunities for contacts that are richly rewarding.

The church membership recognizes some real and pressing needs, and is acutely conscious of some big, unsolved problems. A very evident need is a building that would more adequately serve the church in its total program.

As we have taken this look into the past we have been aroused to a deep sense of gratitude. We are grateful to God for His continued blessing, His help in our endeavors to serve, His forgiveness of our sins. We are grateful to those who have gone before; perhaps sometimes the foundation they laid was insecure but upon it has been built a church that has been of blessing to many. Their lives of service and sacrifice, usually without reward, have given us a heritage that is rich and big with challenge. Very humbly we accept this heritage, and with a prayer that we may prove faithful to the trust, we resolve to pass it on to future generations through the channels of this church.

"HONOUR AND MAJESTY ARE BEFORE HIM," may also, "STRENGTH AND BEAUTY BE IN HIS SANCTUARY." Psalms 96:6.

— Compiled by Elva Schrock

This Booklet is Dedicated to
ALMIGHTY GOD
and the
"Great Cloud of Witnesses"
Who Have Served Him in This Church
and Returned to Their Maker

